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SUBJECT: CHINA: CARDINAL ZEN ON HOLY SEE'S CHINA DIPLOMACY

REF: 07 VATICAN 00193

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher J. Sandrolini, Charge, Embassy
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: According to Cardinal Zen, the Holy See's lack of China expertise within its top ranks has resulted in an ineffective relation with the Government of China (GoC) that fails to take advantage of the window of opportunity afforded by Beijing's preoccupation with its international image in anticipation of the 2008 Olympics. Zen fears the Holy See will improperly place the establishment of diplomatic relations with the GoC ahead of religious freedom and has voiced this concern directly to Pope Benedict XVI. End Summary.

A Vacuum of China Expertise

12. (C) Joseph Cardinal Zen Ze-kium, Cardinal Bishop of Hong Kong, told us January 21 that there is a vacuum of China expertise at the very top of the Holy See. Zen implied that both Cardinal Secretary of State (Prime Minister equivalent) Tarcisio Bertone and Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples Ivan Dias are taking a conciliatory approach to the GoC that reflects their lack of China expertise. The Holy See's current China policy borders on appeasement, said Zen, and is sending the wrong message to the GoC and undermining the underground church.

13. (C) The preeminent China expert within the Holy See is Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, currently President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (note: Zen also mentioned recently-arrived Archbishop Fernando Filoni and Monsignor Gianfranco Rota-Graziosi as other resident Holy See experts). Unfortunately, Zen added, the Holy See's senior leadership discarded Celli as their China point person, leaving the task to deputy foreign minister Pietro Parolin. Zen mentioned he had written Parolin to voice his concern regarding this matter -- and the fact that Celli was not informed about it

in advance -- but had never received a reply.

"They Purposely Distorted the Pope's Message"

¶4. (C) Cardinal Zen said the Pope's June 2007 letter to the Chinese Catholic faithful was a powerful pastoral letter written personally by His Holiness. The letter struck the correct balance between the underground and official churches but unfortunately, the explanatory note, which accompanied the letter, purposely distorted the obligations placed on the underground church. While the Papal letter addressed the underground church in a measured and balanced manner, the more widely distributed and read explanatory note, written by "others", placed far more onus on the underground church to compromise and be accommodating to the official church. Zen said this was not the Pope's intent and had written to "them" to state his concerns. (Comment: Zen was clearly referring to Cardinals Bertone and Dias as "others" and "them").

Push the GoC Before the Beijing Olympic Games

¶5. (C) Zen said the Holy See has an opening to push the GoC for more religious freedom in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The GoC will be highly sensitive to anything that detracts from their Olympic Games public relations efforts. Zen counseled the Holy See to use this time wisely: they should

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push for more religious freedom from the GoC rather than placing an inordinate emphasis on first establishing relations with the GoC, and avoid "making the same mistake the Holy See did with Israel". (Note: The Holy See established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1993, expecting they would help to resolve specific disagreements. Some fourteen years later, these issues are still unresolved. End note.)

¶6. (C) Zen explained that the Holy See had shared with the GoC the June 2007 Papal open letter to the Chinese faithful before its public release. The GoC apparently took strong exception to the letter's comments aimed at diminishing the involvement of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association in Church matters. As a result, Zen added, the government has been conducting a stealth "re-education" campaign of Catholic bishops and priests to inform them of the "mistakes" and "misstatements" contained in the papal letter. Zen also confirmed that diplomats from the PRC Embassy to Italy facilitated communication between Beijing and the Holy See.

Getting a Word in Edgewise with Pope Benedict

¶7. (C) Zen stated that in the period leading up to the release of the June 2007 Papal letter he had advised Pope Benedict and Cardinals Bertone and Dias that, for it to be effective, the letter should be but one of a series of steps aimed at unifying the Catholic Church in China. Zen recommended that the Holy See forward a separate letter to the four most prominent official-church bishops explaining their obligations with respect to the Papal letter. Those who failed to follow the Pope's direction, Zen added, could then be considered for excommunication. Bertone and Dias rejected this advice.

¶8. (C) Zen told us that after the papal letter was promulgated, he sent letters to Bertone and Dias making further suggestions but never received any substantial response. In an effort to clarify matters, the Pope agreed to Zen's request for a meeting. Also present for the occasion were Bertone and Dias. "I believe I made my point," said Zen. "There should be no further miscommunication on this matter."

Holy See Sensitivity to China Matters

¶9. (C) Zen confirmed prior Post reporting (see reftel) indicating that there is no near-term prospect for a Holy See - GoC agreement on relations or episcopal ordinations. Zen also confirmed that the Holy See is taking scrupulous care to avoid upsetting the GoC. As an example, Zen mentioned that members of the Holy See's China Commission are not allowed to take with them the papers and notes discussed during their bi-monthly meetings. The meeting minutes are not distributed and can be read only by visiting an office within the Apostolic Palace.

¶10. (C) Post has seen the same sensitivity within the Holy See to China matters. We note for example:

- Pope Benedict did not mention China in his January 7 speech to the diplomatic corps even though he touched on just about every other country of interest.

- Holy See's cancellation of a meeting with the Dalai Lama in December 2007.

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- Cardinal Bertone counseled Cardinal Zen to refrain from making any public statements regarding religious freedom and the Church in China.

- Post's plans for a "Church in China" roundtable suspended due to the Holy See's lack of support. Cardinal Zen confirmed that no one associated with the Holy See would be able to participate in the event.

- Holy See refused to issue a Vatican passport to a Chinese priest seeking asylum in the United States because of fear the GoC may catch wind of the case and object.

Cardinal Zen Bio Note

¶11. Zen appeared in good health and spirits and had apparently walked most of the route of a long demonstration march held January 13 in Hong Kong. He mentioned that he suffers "a bit" from diabetes and must watch what he eats. Zen also appears to have hearing loss in his left ear as he favored his right ear during our discussions. He said that he looks forward to retiring at some juncture and returning to teaching in Europe or Africa. He said he did not wish to remain in Hong Kong after his retirement so as not to overshadow his successor.

Comment

¶12. (C) Cardinal Zen's forthright comments regarding the inner working of the Holy See at its top levels reinforce our sense that Pope Benedict is taking a hands-off approach to the highly nuanced diplomacy of the Holy See. Cardinal Bertone, as the Prime Minister equivalent, is exerting himself and is showing that he prefers a less strident approach toward China, especially when compared to Cardinal Zen. The Holy See remains highly engaged on China matters with regular bi-monthly meetings by the newly formed Holy See China Commission. Regarding the U.S. role in this matter, Zen agrees that we should not become directly involved in Holy See - China matters as the GoC would react negatively to the influence of a "foreign power."

¶13. (C) However, the Pope is not ignoring Zen. Zen told us that during the late November 2007 Consistory, Pope Benedict said to him: "keep on fighting the battle", referring to his efforts to push the PRC for more religious freedom. Zen has a reputation for holding strong opinions based on conviction, just like the Pope, and for this reason, the Pope probably likes him. At the same time, the issues are too important and, despite Zen's complaints about the Holy See's lack of expertise, the Holy See's long-term interests can not be viewed exclusively from the perspective of an activist Hong Kong bishop. Zen is proposing something risky: push hard now, right before the Olympics, to gain concessions from the GoC. The Holy See is risk-averse and would rather pass on a probable opening than risk making mistakes that would be difficult to reverse, such as precipitating -- through excommunications or open confrontation with the GoC -- a further schism of the Catholic Church in China.

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